

VZCZCXR05283

RR RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHGH RUEHHM RUEHVC
DE RUEHVN #0295/01 1730235

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 220235Z JUN 09

FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2656

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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [LA](#)

SUBJECT: LAOS: FOOD SECURITY TIED TO IMPROVING NUTRITION

REF: STATE 058996

¶1. Summary: Per reftel, DCM discussed U.S. food security goals with acting Director General Tieng Boupha of the MFA. Mr. Boupha noted that achieving food security is critical for Laos to achieve its own development goals and anticipates the Government will support the new U.S. initiative. A Senate Foreign Relations report in February 2009 used Laos, as well as Ethiopia and Zambia, as an example of a country suffering from severe food insecurity. Although self-sufficient in rice production, a WFP study in 2007 stated that every second child under 5 in rural areas of Laos is chronically malnourished (and thus stunted to varying degrees), while two thirds of rural households are at risk of becoming food insecure. In December 2008, the Lao government issued a National Nutrition Policy 2008-2020, prepared together with the FAO and other international organizations, that offers the United States an opportunity to assist Laos in combating food insecurity. End Summary.

¶2. On June 10, the DCM discussed reftel with the MFA's acting Director General for Europe and the America's Tieng Boupha. Mr. Boupha noted that achieving food security in Laos is crucial to Laos achieving its national goal of leaving LDC status by 2020. He anticipates the Government of Laos (GOL) will support the principles behind the food security agenda at the L'Aquila summit. A WFP report released in December 2007 (www.wfp.org/content/laos-comprehensive-food-security-vulnerability-analysis-cfsva) found that malnutrition and stunting rates in Laos had not improved in the past ten years. This set off a scramble among the Government and other development partners to address food security in more detail.

Lugar Study Highlights Food Insecurity in Laos

¶3. On February 6, 2009 the minority staff on the Senate Foreign Relations committee issued a report entitled "Global Food Insecurity: Perspectives from the field." (<http://lugar.senate.gov/food/report>) Laos was one of three countries described in detail as suffering from serious food insecurity. Drawing from the WFP's comprehensive food security report, and interviews with concerned local organizations, the report focused on the critical need to improve nutrition, as Laos is self-sufficient in rice production overall. According to the staff report, Laos scores 20.6 on the Global Health Index, similar to Sudan (20.5). Every second child under 5 in rural areas is malnourished (and thus stunted), while two thirds of rural households are at risk of food insecurity. Approximately 78% of Laos' 6.8 million people are subsistence farmers.

Rural Poor, Minorities Hardest Hit

¶4. The Lugar report highlights the lack of fat, oils, and micronutrients as a major cause of malnutrition in Laos. The most food insecure are the minority hill tribes, who often live in remote villages in the mountainous northern and eastern regions and farm primarily upland rice using slash and burn agriculture, and poor subsistence farmers lacking cash to purchase necessary food supplements. Rural Lao eat little meat, relying on fish for most of their protein, and the Lugar report notes that their diet is low in fats and oils. The prevalence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) from the Indochina war is a unique contributor to food insecurity in Laos. Hill tribes, who often rely on Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP) to supplement their diet, must weigh the need for NTFPs with the real risk of death or disability from accidental contact with UXO.

¶5. Comment: The GOL is currently working on an action plan to implement its 2008-2020 National Nutrition Policy. The Lugar report's suggestions on combating malnutrition and food insecurity in Laos often overlap with the principles articulated in ref tel. Laos has a country-owned plan, is already strategically coordinating with international donors and multilateral agencies, and is desperate for investment in all seven of the highlighted key areas.

¶6. The United States is already active in reducing malnutrition in Laos. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently funded a new school feeding/attendance program in southern Laos, based on a similar program in the north, with a three-year, \$9 million grant. USDA has also funded a

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two-year school feeding/UXO removal program from the NGO Humpty-Dumpty, and the Embassy is currently working with USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance to provide emergency food aid to northern Lao provinces suffering from a severe rat infestation. These measures, while critical to temporarily reducing food insecurity in certain areas, are not designed to systematically increase the GOL's capacity to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition at the national level. Increasing long-term agricultural productivity and expanding access to fats, oils, and micronutrients, both via better education, improved crop selection, and improved UXO clearance, will help Laos ensure that the next ten years see a decrease in rural malnutrition. End Comment.

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